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Clientage and Social Stratification in Early Medieval Ireland: An Archaeological Perspective

John Soderberg

Introduction

Doubts persist about the nature of clientage relationships and the impact they have on social change in medieval Ireland. Documentary sources often present a vision of a highly stratified society in early medieval Ireland. Each rank appears with rights and privileges distinct from those above and below. From this perspective, clientage provides upper social strata with a mechanism for acquiring more power to control subordinates and extract wealth from them, creating a quasi-feudal view of early medieval Irish society. In contrast to this view, other elements of the same documents suggest that very little distinguishes one stratum from another. From this viewpoint, the orientation that clientage created around cattle serves to level the distribution of wealth and to disable the possibility of a great concentration of wealth accumulating in upper strata. In place of coercion as the dominant theme, kin-based cooperation and a balance of interests prevail in this second view of early medieval Irish society. Clientage in early medieval Ireland, then, presents an apparent contradiction: powerful elites both do and do not appear to exist. It is not necessary to resolve this contradiction. Societies are messy. But, the contradiction does deserve more consideration than it has yet received.

Archaeologists are developing new approaches to social complexity that may help explain these contradictory views of clientage and early medieval Irish society.[1] Social complexity is a term used to

[1] Typically, the early medieval period in Ireland is considered to span the period from circa AD 400 to circa AD 1200. The tenth century marks a significant shift in this period due in part to the growth of urban centers such as Dublin. For much of the following discussion, circumstances identified as prevalent in the early medieval period are typically most clearly seen in the period prior to the tenth century and less clearly thereafter. This paper is a preliminary review of this topic that concentrates on establishing some general parameters for the period. Full

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describe a suite of social changes associated with the appearance of substantially larger scale societies than had existed previously. Typical features include growth of urban centers, highly specialized economies, monumental architecture, and written script. The emergence of social complexity brings radical social change: with increasing economic specialization, people develop new symbiotic relationships in which they depend on increasingly distant and unfamiliar groups for basic necessities. Among archaeologists, prevailing approaches to social complexity focus on coercive elite strategies for enhancing their own power to control others as the force driving social complexity.

From this perspective, elites organize specialization and exchange in order to "create and maintain social inequalities, strengthen political coalitions and fund new institutions of control."[2] Elites act to enhance their own status. The institutions that they fund are by-products of that process. A recent survey of early medieval urbanism demonstrates the continuing prevalence of this approach. In it Blomkvist writes, "Modern Medieval archaeologists....think that the foremost factor behind towns was *power* and *redistribution* rather than trade and craft."[3] For such approaches to urbanism and other facets of social complexity, the ability to subordinate is the fulcrum on which social complexity rises.

During the last decade archaeologists who have become frustrated with the often exclusive reliance on coercion for explaining social change have called for an approach that first recognizes fundamental diversity in social complexity and that second recognizes a broad range of socioeconomic strategies creating such diversity. For example, Renfrew (2001) argues that Pueblo Bonito, located in the Southwestern United States, was an urban center—i.e. it was an example of the most typical sort of social complexity—yet it was a product of a society in which elites did not have the coercive tools that should be a prerequisite for urbanism. In fact, Renfrew describes the society as "essentially egalitarian."[4] From the

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examination of when and why changes occur requires more attention to temporal and geographic variation than is given here.

[2] Brumfiel and Earle 1987: 3.

[3] Blomkvist 1996: 140, emphasis and capitalization in original.

[4] Renfrew 2001: 14.

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coercive perspective on social complexity, egalitarian societies are supposed to give way to stratified societies before, or at least as, social complexity develops. Renfrew upends this perspective by concluding that, not only is the society egalitarian, it is precisely the egalitarian features that lead to urbanization. While most researchers would admit that complex societies have egalitarian features, typically those features are viewed as anachronisms having little impact on change, other than slowing its pace. By contrast, for Renfrew, they are an engine of change.

Early medieval Ireland offers many of the same interpretive issues as Pueblo Bonito does. Scholars have long debated whether or not urban centers existed around monasteries in Ireland prior to the establishment of Viking trade centers such as Dublin. Scholars often dismiss the possibility of pre-Viking urban centers developing around monasteries on the basis that necessary preconditions for urbanization were not sufficiently prevalent in that period. Other scholars argue that 'monastic towns' did exist and their presence in anomalous circumstances demands revision of models for what causes urbanism to develop. I have argued elsewhere that some form of urbanism emerged around Clonmacnoise monastery (Soderberg 2003). If such is indeed the case, monastic towns, pose troubling questions about early medieval Irish society. Is Ireland considerably more stratified in the pre-Viking period than is generally thought or are the pre-Viking centers a product of the same sort of relatively egalitarian society as Pueblo Bonito?

Examining the nature of clientage goes to the heart of such questions. If clientage relationships did give elites robust coercive tools for leveraging their power, one can begin to build an argument that pre-Viking urban centers are the product of similar circumstances to those thought to generate urban settlements in early medieval Europe. In short, early medieval Ireland supports prevailing models of social complexity. If, however, clientage does not provide particularly robust tools of coercion and it levels differences between social strata, 'monastic towns' represent a challenge to models of early medieval urbanism. This paper uses archaeological evidence to compare the level of stratification in Ireland to that of other European locales in order to determine if new perspectives are necessary for understanding what causes urbanism and other related changes in early medieval Ireland.

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Clientage in Early Medieval Ireland

Clientage is, in material terms, a means of transferring food, raw materials, labor, military service, and protection between groups. An extensive literature describes both the complexities of these exchange arrangements and the ambiguities inherent in the documentary records.[5] Rather than reviewing that literature in detail, this section raises a few salient points about prevailing views of clientage. Early medieval sources give detailed descriptions of the types of goods and services transferred in the various clientage arrangements. Lay and ecclesiastical arrangements were somewhat different, and, within those two categories, a distinction was drawn between base and free clientage. Generally speaking though, each of these arrangements involved the transfer of valued items—such as cattle or protection—in return for specified goods and services. Speaking of clientage in strictly economic terms, however, is inaccurate. As Ó Cróinín, writes, "The basis of [early medieval Irish] society is the institution of clientship."[6] The status of a noble was linked to having a certain number of clients. Likewise, the size of the grant given was linked to the legal status of the client. Gerriets also points out that a great variety of social relationships were conceptualized in terms of clientage:

> Clientship permeated all levels of Irish society and all its institutions...[Kings] were allied to one another through ties of *dependence*...The Church also adopted the Irish system of *dependency*, receiving its material support and occasionally military services from *dependent* free commoners. The major monasteries, such as Armagh, controlled daughter monasteries through alliances which

[5] Works on clientage include: Kelly (1988, 1997), Ó Corráin (1972), Ó Cróinín (1995), Gerriets (1983, 1987), Patterson (1994, 1995), and Jaski (2000). The following discussion is based on these works.

[6] Ó Cróinín 1995: 141.

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> resembled those of the superior king and his *dependent* kings."[7]

These economic and political roles made clientage fundamental to the organizational logic of early medieval Irish society; consequently, depending on one's view of clientage, one's view of early medieval society changes profoundly.

Views about the socioeconomic significance of clientage can be grouped, at least provisionally, into two categories. Some works emphasize that the terms of clientage relationships tend to collapse distinctions between different social strata. For example, Ó Cróinín writes, "In a tribal economy where wealth is reckoned in terms of land and livestock, the standard of living among the aristocracy cannot have differed very much from that of the ordinary farmer." Jaski adopts a similar emphasis on "mutualistic" aspects of clientage.[8] Neither author suggests that elements of clientage that level distinctions are the only social consequences of clientage, but they do take care to foreground such features in their assessments of the social organization that clientage relationships entailed.

Gerriets' repeated use of the word 'dependence' in the above quote signals the different orientation of the second approach to clientage. It views clientage as coercive and a tool for deepening divides between social strata. Through the relationships that clientage fosters, clients became beholden to a lord. This dependency gives a lord the opportunity to further exploit clients. Fergus Kelly, for example, states that "It seems from the law-texts that by far the most important transfer of foodstuffs in early Irish society was the food-rent which a client (*céile*) paid to a lord (*flaith*) in return for a fief...As far as we can judge from the texts, the system weighed heavily in favor of the lord."[9] Patterson arrives at much the same conclusion: "the contract between lord and base-client had a number of features which tended to entrap the client in the relationship."[10]

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[7] Gerriets 1983: 43, emphasis added.
[8] Ó Cróinín 1995: 142; Jaski 2000: 89-112.
[9] Kelly 1997: 320.
[10] Patterson 1994: 176.

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Elsewhere, she concludes that, through clientage, society was "divided into proto-classes by control of the distribution of cattle to farmers."[11] A recent article on trade in early medieval Ireland reflects much the same view of the social organization. The author writes: "Early Irish society was strictly hierarchical...The whole of society was divided into social classes, each one tied to its neighbors by the circulation of goods and services."[12]

The works that adopt a dependency centered approach to clientage do not simply elide the mutualistic aspects of clientage. Most commentators also note that very little actually distinguishes a patron from a base-client. For example, Kelly describes numerous elements of clientage relationships that curb a patron's coercive power. Clientage ties are not heritable. They do not pass on to descendents. Social mobility is also possible. Individuals can ascend and descend through a hierarchy. Additionally, both parties have the ability to break clientage ties, and clients could engage several patrons at once. In his summary statements, however, Kelly isolates dependency and stratification as primary features. He stipulates that it is "hierarchical and inegalitarian."[13] Patterson also notes curbs on a lord's authority, but, ultimately, she arrives at much the same conclusion as Kelly. She dismisses the mutualistic elements of clientage as epiphenomenal to its fundamentally coercive nature. A level of discomfort with this position is evident at the end of a 1995 article where she asks "how lords, being possessed of coercive power, were not more oppressive to the peasants than they were."[14] Implicit in this question is the recognition that the evidence of socioeconomic relationships in early medieval Ireland is equivocal on stratification. Significantly, though, the question does not raise the possibility that clientage might not create "lords possessed of coercive power." It does not consider how the mutualistic elements of clientage might have fostered different social

[11] Patterson 1995: 132.
[12] Comber 2001: 76-77.
[13] Kelly 1988: 26-33; 7.
[14] Patterson 1995: 133.

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dynamics. [15] If one maintains the significance of such elements, dependency-based perspectives leave us with a curiously inert elite stratum, apparently incapable of using the tools at hand to effect the sorts of changes as its counterpart elsewhere in Europe did.

It is the equation of clientage and coercion that allows Patterson to cast the egalitarian qualities of early medieval Irish society as epiphenomenal. This paper proposes an alternative approach by changing the fundamental question asked of clientage. Rather than asking why lords didn't use the tools offered by clientage more extensively, this paper asks are the lords truly possessed of coercive power? In other words, is early medieval Ireland significantly stratified in the centuries leading up to the Viking era? In order to establish the significance of asking this question, I will first examine how differing views of stratification can affect views of society.

The Significance of Stratification: Ireland and the Origins of Urbanism

Some archaeologists have recently begun focusing on mutualistic aspects of societies because they have become frustrated with the prevailing orientation on coercive strategies. As was noted above, theories similar to the dependency approach to clientage have gained wide currency in anthropological theory over the past several decades. Such arguments focus on economic heterogeneity. Through specialization, economic tasks are fragmented so that groups and individuals develop fundamentally different economic orientations, giving elites an opportunity to intervene in and eventually control economic processes.

[15] In the interests of fairness, it is important to note that both Gerriets and Patterson are constructing arguments designed to compensate for the tendency of earlier work to ignore coercion and exploitation. Their discussions of clientage are shaped by this tactical goal and represent important advancements of discourse on the topic. From this perspective, the goal of this paper is not rejecting the dependency approach. The goal is to demonstrate the need for a complimentary approach to account for additional dynamics associated with clientage.

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Elites found cities to foster specialization; cities must be provisioned with food and raw materials, which extends economic heterogeneity into rural areas. Following this line of argument, social complexity appears when elites acquire robust powers to coerce and slip out of social bonds that earlier caused elites to participate in more cooperative strategies. One of the reasons why egalitarian features of a society are typically thought incapable of producing social complexity is that these features are not associated with the heterogeneous economies thought essential for social complexity to develop. Typically, they are thought to foster economic *homogeneity*. Consequently, cooperative strategies—which are seen as prevalent in egalitarian, kin-based societies—must be superceded for social complexity to develop (e.g. Johnson and Earle 1987).

Renfrew's approach to Pueblo Bonito is part of a reaction to thi heavy and at times exclusive focus on coercive strategies as the engine fo social complexity. Starting in the middle 1990's articles began to appear that called for a new approach to social complexity, one which recognizes fundamental diversity in social complexity and which defines a wide spectrum of strategies causing that diversity. For example Feinman (1995) describes a coercive organization as pursuing "network strategies" and a cooperative organization as pursuing "corporate strategies," and suggests that both are means of developing social complexity. Others have taken a slightly different approach and come to view different examples of social complexity as variable results of confrontation between coercive and cooperative strategies. For example, McGuire and Saitta (1998) use the words of an ethnographer to describe pueblo society: "Although they have petty captains, they obey them badly and in very few things." These approaches to social complexity differ from prevailing dependency-based approaches in that the perspective advocated by Renfrew and others defines the elaboration of a common base for interaction between relatively autonomous groups as driving change.

Prior to Renfrew's article on Pueblo Bonito, the cooperative perspective had not precisely defined the nature of this common base and how it articulates with economic and political activity. Defining egalitarian societies as those in which kin-based cooperative strategies are prevalent and in which elites do not possess robust tools for establishing dependency, Renfrew suggests that the forms of social complexity based

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in egalitarian societies are characterized by monumental religious centers such as Pueblo Bonito, which is a five-story, D-shaped building with almost 800 rooms surrounding a plaza with two kivas (subterranean ceremonial rooms).[16] Pueblo Bonito is part of the Chaco Canyon settlement system that contains at least nine similar settlements and several hundred smaller villages. Precursors of this settlement type date to the middle of the first millennium AD. Dendrochronology shows construction beginning at Pueblo Bonito in AD 919 and ending in 1115.[17] Past studies have explained urban settlement in Chaco Canyon as the product of an elite power base or a secondary trading center on the periphery of Mesoamerican cities.

Based on the conclusion that the society was not sufficiently stratified, Renfrew rejects these interpretations and argues that Pueblo Bonito is a "Location of High Devotional Expression (LHDE)".[18] Rather than being motivated by elite power acquisition strategies, Renfrew argues that the population was motivated "by a powerful belief system that has led them to these costly and expressive acts."[19] While Renfrew does not mention Paul Wheatley's work on "ceremonial centers," his concept is quite similar to the notion Wheatley developed (Wheatley 1971). Both highlight the importance of establishing common ground upon which relatively autonomous groups can congregate without becoming subsumed into a fixed hierarchy. Both also argue that such centers represent a distinct form of social complexity for which dependency-based explanations provide insufficient explanations.

Renfrew's perspective has vast implications for understanding early medieval Ireland and medieval Europe. Generally, the coercive perspective prevails in explanations of urbanization in early medieval Europe. The growth of royal power is viewed as the catalyst for the emergence of urban trade centers and a market economy in which individual competition is the dominant mode of interaction (e.g. Hodges 1982, 1997). For Ireland in particular, this perspective typically casts early

[16] Cameron and Toll 2001:5-6.
[17] Price and Feinman 1997: 271-72.
[18] Renfrew 2001: 14.
[19] Ibid: 18.

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medieval Ireland as lagging behind other areas of northwestern Europe because, as Hodges argues, prior to circa 900, Irish kings did not achieve sufficient independence from the social obligations that restrained their ability to institute emporia and the associated social change. Hodges writes:

> The inability to centralize power, to generate sufficient control of scarce resources, meant that the Irish kings remained systematically restrained...Contact with the rest of Europe was too infrequent or spasmodic for the negative feedback to be overcome.[20]

For those following this perspective, the lack of sufficient social stratification explains the several centuries of delay in urbanism reaching Ireland (see also Graham 1987, Valante 1998, and Swift 1998). This perspective flatly rejects the possibility of Irish monasteries being urban centers well prior to AD 900.

Misgivings about the validity of this perspective on Ireland are longstanding. Frequently, concerns focus on the possibility that certain monasteries develop into urban centers several centuries prior to AD 900. Doherty (1985), for example, uses Wheatley's concept of a ceremonial center to argue that, not only were monasteries urban well prior to the establishment of Viking centers, but that they also represent a more egalitarian type of urban center from the trade centers Hodges uses as the paradigm of northwestern European urbanism. Archaeology is beginning to lend support to the early date for Irish urbanism since excavation at Clonmacnoise has produced evidence for provisioning of the settlement with cattle at circa AD 700 (Soderberg 2003). Evidence for provisioning has long been used as a key indicator of the urban status of settlements in Europe and elsewhere. But deciding that urbanism appears circa 700 creates a more fundamental problem. Much like Pueblo Bonito, an urban

[20] Hodges 1982:195-196.

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Clonmacnoise at AD 700 is anomalous because, in prevailing perspectives on social complexity, the coercive mechanisms that foster urbanism are generally not thought to be well developed in that period. A city ought not to develop in either place. If one does, either more stratification exists than is currently believed or some other mechanism leads to urbanism.

This debate returns us to the contradiction presented by clientage. Clientage could provide elites with the coercive tools necessary to drive the creation of urban centers well before AD 900. In that case, an urban Clonmacnoise at AD 700 could be a result of the same processes that are seen as fostering urbanism elsewhere. This conclusion matches well with the view of Ireland as lagging behind other areas where lords are more oppressive. It also resolves the contradiction between coercive and cooperative views of clientage by rendering the cooperative elements epiphenomenal. If, however, lords were not truly "possessed of coercive power," the problem remains.

Archaeology provides several different measures of elite power. If archaeological evidence from Ireland produces evidence for stratification parallel to that found in other areas of Europe, clientage is more reasonably seen as the fulcrum through which elites leverage their power to found urban centers. Unfortunately, the archaeological evidence from Ireland does not provide substantial support for this conclusion.

Archaeological Evidence for Social Stratification in Europe during the Early Middle Ages

Archaeologists have two particularly useful means of assessing social stratification and political centralization: burial and settlement structure. Differences in the wealth deposited in graves provide an indication of disparities in the distribution of wealth in a society. Archaeologists generally view high concentrations of grave goods in a small percentage of graves as reflecting conspicuous consumption and a display of power on the part of either the dead or those conducting the burial. Differences in the manner and location of burial have similar implications.

During the early medieval period, burials in Frankish areas produce ample evidence for a high degree of social stratification and

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centralization. Numerous cemeteries in Frankish areas provide striking evidence for the emergence of a powerful, wealthy elite (James 1979). The presumed grave of Childerick (d.481/2) is a classic example of asserting power through lavish display of grave goods and mobilization of Roman and Germanic cultural motifs. At Krefeld-Gellep, graves such as #1782 (circa 525) provide evidence of increased social differentiation and increased ethnic/class identification among elites (Pirling 1966, 1974, 1979). Christlein (1991) identifies an increase in social stratification among the Alamans where, in the early seventh century, elite burials become separated from other burials. Further east, a similar process is evident later in the seventh century when aristocratic burials shift to separate churchyards away from older communal graveyards.[21] Carver explains the British site of Sutton Hoo as a similar assertion of royal authority (Carver 1989, 1999b).

Assessment of stratification through settlement evidence is a centerpiece of Anglo-Saxon archaeology. For example, Hinton argues that a key concern with the Early Anglo-Saxon period is assessing "the extent to which a landowning class continued to exist." He suggests that towns provide evidence of enduring stratification: they "were being used into the fifth century as centers for the collection of agricultural products...by a few opportunists who were able to usurp authority locally to redistribute large volumes of produce."[22] Post-Roman Gloucester also fits this pattern. Heighway describes Gloucester in the fifth to eighth century as "a series of large enclosures," noting that the most prominent signs of decay—or, more accurately, altered use—appear in public buildings such as baths and the forum.[23] By contrast, some smaller private buildings show signs of refurbishment in the same period. Likewise, just north of Gloucester at Kingsholm, in the early fifth century a male was buried in a mausoleum with high-status grave goods. Hinton notes that none of the grave goods are unequivocally those of a warrior.[24] Rather, he defines them as those c an aristocrat or an autocrat. To Heighway, the combination of this burial,

[21] Halsall 1995: 162, 273.
[22] Carver 1999: 54;60.
[23] Heighway 1984: 38.
[24] Hinton 1999: 60-61.

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subsequent royal manor on the site and the examples of private refurbishment in Glouchester reflects the emergence an aristocracy replacing the more complex Roman period administration. Biddle (1979) interprets evidence from Winchester in a similar manner, concluding that the town remained a political and religious center in the post-Roman period.

While not an urban settlement, Yeavering provides particularly fertile evidence for linking royal authority and stratification with redistribution (Hope-Taylor 1977). The site contained two special purpose structures that Hope-Taylor links to royal power, although the exact purpose of both is difficult to ascertain, partly because they are uncommon structures. One, a banked enclosure over 100 meters in diameter, is typically regarded as used to hold cattle collected as renders from subordinates. The second structure is reminiscent of Roman period amphitheaters, although it was constructed from wood.[25] This structure is believed to be for assemblies.[26] Excavations at Yeavering also revealed construction of several large halls that provide evidence of stratification in their unusually large dimensions. The first great hall at Yeavering measured 25 meters by 11 meters, enclosing an area of 275 square meters. By contrast a middle-sized hall at Chalton, an extensively excavated settlement in southern Britain, measured 8.5 meters by 5.3 meters, enclosing 45.05 square meters.[27] The area enclosed by the Yeavering hall was six times that of the middle-sized Chalton hall. Expressed differently, the Chalton hall occupied only 16.38% of the area of the Yeavering hall. Yeavering also had an unusually wide range of building sizes on the settlement itself.[28] Though Yeavering does have small buildings, none of the buildings from Chalton enclosed more than 100 square meters.

Cognizant of the problems in inferring social organization from any one line of evidence, Carver suggests considering all forms of material culture in terms of the degree to which they express social stratification. He cites evidence of systematic collection of surplus at the

[25] Welch 1992: 45, 46.
[26] Hinton 1999: 61.
[27] Welch 1992: 17.
[28] James, Marshall, and Millett 1999: 85.

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seventh- and eighth-century settlement at Wicken Bonhunt and the growth of Ipswich as a market place in the seventh century as evidence of growing royal authority (Carver 1989). The distribution of a type of Ipswich pottery largely within political boundaries corroborates this theory (Hinton 1990). In sum, Carver posits that similar expressions of "centralization of status" or "signals of territorial control"..."precess around the territories of the North Sea" between the fifth and eighth or tenth centuries. Elsewhere he writes that the Middle Anglo-Saxon period (circa 600-800) saw "The break-up of folk society into manorial networks run by aristocratic families headed by a king...It is likely that kings and kingdoms only existed as a reality from this point".[29] In this manner the story of early medieval Europe becomes a story of increasing stratification.

Social Stratification in Ireland during the Early Middle Ages

Little archaeological evidence exists to support the argument that Irish aristocrats developed the level of control and ability to divert resources exhibited elsewhere in Europe. A social hierarchy did, of course, exist in early medieval Ireland. Distributions of precious goods are skewed toward high status settlements, suggesting that an elite class limited access to prestigious items. If, however, one considers other types of archaeological data, such evidence for stratification becomes difficult to replicate. Stout's work on ringforts (1997) stands as the most thorough attempt to correlate the vision of society derived from legal texts with that derived from the archaeological record.[30] He examines morphological and

[29] Carver 1999a: 10; Carver 1999b: 36.

[30] Ringforts are enclosed farmyards. They are the most prevalent structure to survive from the medieval period. The term *ringfort* designates a circular enclosure usually between 20 and 40 meters in diameter (also called a rath, cashel, *lios*, and fairy-fort). The enclosures take various forms including earthen banks, ditches, and stone walls. Uni-, bi-, and trivallate enclosures are present among the over 30,000 known examples of ringforts. The interiors of ringforts do not have an entirely consistent pattern. Nonetheless, the waterlogged site at Deer Park Farms probably provides a representative example. It has seventh-century layers in which three or four circular, wattle-walled huts stood at any given time

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locational differences between ringforts and, through cluster analysis, establishes five distinct groups. Various features of their location and morphology also suggest a hierarchical ordering of these groups.[31] From this analysis, he concludes that these five clusters represent distinct social grades that appear to correlate with social grades described in contemporary legal tracts as "free." These free strata are also the same groups that enter into clientage.

While Stout's argument is compelling, the distinctions he isolates are generally quite subtle. The differences between settlements in early medieval Ireland were not of the same degree as appears between contemporary settlements in Britain. Little difference existed between the highest status ringforts and average ringforts. For example, Stout finds that the mean for the internal diameter of ringforts is approximately 30 meters. Those ringforts he associates with the highest status groups have a somewhat larger internal diameter (47 meters). This difference is significant in terms of establishing a settlement hierarchy, but relative to evidence from elsewhere, it suggests modest stratification. One of the few readily discernable differences in morphology lies in the number of enclosing banks surrounding the habitation area; however, even this feature does not provide an unambiguous marker of status. The number of enclosing banks is not precisely correlated with other indicators of status.[32] While Stout does make a compelling argument for the existence of status differentiations between groups of ringforts, it is crucial to remember that the distinctions are mainly apparent in the results of fairly sophisticated statistical analysis.

(Lynn 1989). Of the defensive capabilities of ringforts, Stout writes: "Ringforts were not built to repel prolonged sieges designed to annex territories and populations, but rather to repel the lightning cattle raids which were endemic during the Early Christian [i.e early medieval] period in Ireland" (Stout 1997: 20). For a review of evidence for ringforts, see also Limbert (1996).

[31] It is important to recognize here that the lowest status, or bonded, groups are not represented well in either the archaeological or the documentary record. Consequently, discussions of stratification are confined to a limited range of the population. Notably, however, several arguments do exist that the range covered does represent a majority of the population (e.g. Stout 1997 and Patterson 1994).

[32] Warner 1988: 59.

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Lynn's study of house construction in early medieval Ireland provides a similar view of early medieval Irish society. The total sample of domestic structures he examined is over 250, dating between circa AD 500 and AD 1200. Approximately half of the known structures are round, and half are rectangular. The data derive mainly from excavations on ringforts but also include structures from crannogs, ecclesiastical sites, and unenclosed sites. The study presents two conclusions relevant to clientage. First, Lynn finds no difference in style or quality of construction between high, ordinary, and low status sites as described in documents or as identified in excavation.[33] Second, Lynn finds a correlation between the diameter of round houses and the status of a site, as designated by documents and/or archaeological evidence. Based on a sample of 50 excavated round houses, he finds approximately 6 meters to be the mode diameter. The largest diameter house occurs at the high status crannog Moynagh Lough (Co. Meath). It is 10 meters wide. Likewise the houses from Deer Park Farms, which Lynn—the excavator—argues is a middle to low status site, tend to fall below 6 meters.

Although Lynn does not compare the Irish data with data from elsewhere, as with the studies of ringforts, the degree of difference between the largest and the average house size is small relative to Britain. The Moynagh house has somewhat less than three times the area of Lynn's mode house size. By contrast, the Yeavering hall has six times the area of the middle sized Chalton house. Expressed differently, the middle sized Chalton hall occupies 16.38% of the area covered by one of the vast halls at Yeavering; however, Lynn's mode house size covers 35.99% of the area enclosed by the Moynagh Lough house. For the Irish distribution to show an equivalent degree of difference between Moynagh and the mode diameter, the Moynagh house would have to have a diameter of 14.82 m, nearly half again as wide as it actually is. Interestingly, Lynn also graphs the size of houses assigned to different ranks in the *Crith Gablach* and finds a similar distribution.[34] There are differences in living space between round and rectangular houses which make direct comparison of area enclosed difficult to execute in a precise way

[33] Lynn 1994: 91.
[34] Ibid: 90-91.

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however, the general contrast in the degree of difference between Ireland and Britain is striking. As with the other data on ringfort morphology, stratification appears considerably less pronounced in Ireland than in Britain. Neither Lynn nor Stout finds evidence for a wide social gulf between social strata.

The specialized structures at Yeavering are redolent with royal power. Both the grandstand and the large cattle enclosure evoke an ability to command and draw in resources. In Ireland, while the concentration of excavation within habitation areas of these sites might well cause a bias against identifying specialized features such as those seen at Yeavering, as the evidence currently stands, few parallel structures exist. Several royal sites are mentioned in texts as the seat of a figure or dynasty. Several of these sites are also identified with known sites. Warner (1988) mentions the following: (the rock of) Cashel (Co. Tipperary) and the kings of *Caisel*; Garranes (Co. Cork) and *Ráith Raithleann*, fort of the kings of *Raithliu*; Lagore (Co. Meath) and *Loch Gabor*, seat of the Southern *Brega*; Knowth (Co. Meath) and *Cnogba*, seat of the Northern *Brega*; and Clogher (Co. Tyrone) and *Clochar*, the seat of *Uí Crimthainn*.[35] Among these sites, one analogy with the specialized structures at Yeavering occurs at Clogher, where Warner identified a possible drove way for cattle and an associated enclosure.[36] Roughly parallel enclosures are known from elsewhere in Ireland.

Ringforts without evidence for occupation are found in various locations.[37] For example, O'Kelly considers Garryduff (Co. Cork) to be a high status site (1962). A neighboring enclosure produced no evidence of occupation other than small amounts of charcoal. O'Kelly suggests that this enclosure acted as a coral for livestock, which appear to have otherwise been kept in the enclosure surrounding houses. Both Warner and O'Kelly link these apparently non-domestic ringforts with clientage and changes in both the nature and level of royal power. The temptation is to link such evidence with Yeavering and on downward to Gloucester and Winchester. Such associations may well be reasonable; however, they

[35] Warner 1988: 53-5.
[36] Ibid: 62.
[37] See Stout 1997: 35 for a list.

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must also be balanced against evidence suggesting that Irish elites did not have the same degree of centralized control as their British contemporaries and that early medieval Irish society is less stratified.[38]

As was noted above, if one views a relatively egalitarian society as incapable of producing cities and other features of social complexity, the logical conclusion is that Ireland simply lags behind more centralized areas and that Ireland's social organization is a muted version of what appears in more stratified areas. The tale of early medieval Ireland then becomes one of catching up to the organization seen earlier in those other areas.

Alternatively, the difference may not be simply in pace of change. If emerging perspectives on social complexity are valid, the nature of the social organization may be the fundamental difference. As Renfrew suggests occurs at Pueblo Bonito, Ireland may produce a society with features of social complexity that are based on a relatively egalitarian social organization. In other words, Ireland represents a different social organization, not a slower one. From this perspective, the drove way at Clogher does not mark the key social dynamic in early medieval Ireland. Rather, the fact that the inhabitants lived in a settlement much the same as other ringforts may suggest the key dynamic.

Animal Bones as Indicators of Social Stratification

Animal bones provide another line of archaeological evidence relevant to understanding distinctions between social strata. Archaeologists use animal bones to reconstruct herd management techniques based on such information as age and sex of the animals represented in assemblages from archaeological sites. Since clientage relationships are worked out, in part, through the movement of animals between different sites, these movements should foster different bone

[38] Consideration of literature arguing that stratification is limited in Anglo-Saxon England is beyond the scope of this paper. Carver (1999a: 9), for example, views evidence as "rather more shaky" than it is for Continental Europe. Such observations are, however, important because they suggest that the perspective developed here for early medieval Ireland has applications elsewhere.

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assemblages on different sites, particularly in a case such as Ireland where cattle are both a primary determinant of status and a primary feature of clientage relationships. Oddly, they do not. The differences between animal bone assemblages are no greater than those of the layout of ringforts.

Three methodologies are typically utilized for identifying status differences in animal bone assemblages: *species ratio*, *skeletal part representation*, and *age structure* (Crabtree 1990). These methodologies are used in studies of sites across the globe. Studies from a variety of localities provide a context for assessing evidence for stratification in faunal assemblages from Ireland.[39] *Species ratio* refers to the relative abundance of each species in an assemblage. Where elites restrict access to a species, that species may become more prevalent on high status sites. For instance, Sandefur (1985) found that in the early Inka period in the central Andes, elites consumed a disproportionate amount of camelid meat. Similarly, in medieval England, deer bones are more common in assemblages from castles than in those from towns or villages. Grant (1988) regards this disparity as reflecting how access to deer was controlled by elites. Studies of *skeletal part representation* examine how the frequency of a given skeletal element compares to the most common element. Since the original number of bones in a given species' skeleton is known, this statistic provides a measure of what elements are lost or removed from a site. Elites can acquire disproportionate access to preferred cuts of meat and, consequently, the bones associated with those cuts of meat become more frequent on elite sites. Several studies have found high concentrations of bones from the meaty haunches of deer at castle and ecclesiastical sites in medieval Britain (Albarella and Davis 1996; Bond and O'Connor 1999). Other studies have shown that on several Late Mississippian sites in North America (AD 1000-1500), high status settlements contain a high proportion of upper limb bones relative to lower status sites. Low status sites tend to have more of the lower limb

[39] Each of the following studies is problematic in some respects and alternative interpretations are possible. Since the goal in mentioning these studies is only to demonstrate how stratification might be manifest in a faunal assemblage, these interpretive complexities are not explored here.

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bones that are associated with less meat and lower quality meat (e.g. Bogan 1983). Schultz and Gust (1983) identify differences in cuts of meat present in assemblages from four sites in nineteenth-century Sacramento. By using data on the price of different carcass portions, they demonstrate that dietary differences follow status differences. Similarly, Singer (1985) associates butchery patterns for different types of fish with nineteenth-century fish prices in New England and connects differences in the faunal assemblages excavated from households with different income levels.

Archaeologists use the *age structure* of an assemblage for a similar purpose: to determine if inhabitants of a site had ample or restricted access to animals of different ages. For meat consumption, younger animals tend to provide higher quality meat. In several studies of Iron Age African sites, some high status sites have a relatively high percentage of bones from young cattle, while low status sites have a greater proportion of bones from mature animals (Reid 1996). The Yeavering faunal assemblage has also been interpreted in terms of social stratification. From this perspective, the high concentration of bones from young cattle reflect feasts occurring in the great hall. Hinton summarizes the significance of the feasts in the following manner: "These occasions were used to reinforce social ties that bound people together, as lord and dependent".[40]

Both the small size of the assemblages derived from most rural sites and the fact that several of the sites with large assemblages were studied before modern recording methods were developed limit assessment of clientage in early medieval Ireland. While problems created by that situation should not be ignored, McCormick has established numerous aspect of animal management in medieval Ireland through his examination of the large and well-preserved assemblage from Moynagh Lough and judicious use of other available material.[41]

None of the three markers of stratification are clearly present. In contrast to the results noted earlier from the Andes and England, *the species ratios* from early medieval Irish sites show remarkably little variation attributable to stratification. Most sites produce assemblages in

[40] Hinton 1999: 61, 62.
[41] McCormick 1983, 1987, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1997.

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which the majority of bones are from cattle. Pigs are the second most common animal, and sheep the third. Rathmullen presents the most striking divergence from the typical pattern. In levels dating from the sixth to the eighth century nearly half of the animal bones are from sheep. In levels dating between the ninth and the twelfth century pigs represent over half of the assemblage.[42] As McCormick describes, Lecale, where Rathmullen is located, is unusual for Ireland in that it is has a substantial amount of land that is suitable for arable agriculture and less land is devoted to pasture. McCormick suggests that the agricultural orientation in Lecale may foster the unusual species ratio at Rathmullen. The other striking variation in faunal assemblages from rural sites dates to the end of the early medieval period. McCormick (1992b) describes a shift at the end of the early medieval period (twelfth century) in which the percentage of sheep rises at several sites. This change, however, is associated with fundamental change in many areas of Ireland that bring about a dramatic increase in social stratification in the later middle ages.[43] These exceptions to the general orientation on cattle serve mainly to highlight the homogeneous nature of evidence from early medieval sites.

Two relevant articles provide possible exceptions to this pattern. Newman reinterprets Ballinderry crannog #2 as containing a pre-crannog early medieval horizon representing high status occupation (Newman 2002). If that interpretation is correct, he has provided an evocative parallel to the evidence from later English castles because his reinterpretation suggests that a substantial number of red deer carcasses are archaeological and represent the remains of hunting. Notably though, these deer are not the fallow deer associated with later medieval hunting parks. Emphasizing this contrast, while Kelly finds textual evidence of

[42] McCormick 1997: 28.

[43] Interestingly, one explanation for the relatively low degree of stratification in Ireland is the cattle orientation, which much of the land in Ireland fosters. The effects of this cattle orientation are discussed in more detail below, but, given the location of Rathmullen, the fact that it stands out from the general pattern is not surprising. Furthermore, the sites showing high percentages of sheep in the twelfth century are located in areas that are also amenable to arable agriculture. One would expect such areas to have greater potential to develop high degrees of stratification.

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kings employing huntsmen in law-texts,[44] he finds no references to deer-park or hunting preserves in Old Irish texts. He also finds no evidence of a closed hunting-season or legislation protecting hinds or fawns. Such developments are associated with the thirteenth century and later when fallow deer are introduced to Ireland (McCormick 1999) and when evidence of stratification is generally more apparent. Consequently, while the concentration of red deer at Ballinderry #2 may mark the presence of privileged inhabitants, it does not necessarily mark lords possessed of coercive power, to borrow Patterson's terminology.

In terms of the second marker of social stratification in bone assemblages, *skeletal part frequency*, again little variation is evident. The range of skeletal elements found on rural sites suggests that cattle are being butchered on site and that whole carcasses are being deposited on site. Descriptions of clientage arrangements suggest that base clients owed renders of "fat from the rear third of a cow" in addition to other agricultural products.[45] Consequently, one might expect low-status sites to produce disproportionately high percentages of front-limb elements and high-status sites to produce disproportionately high percentages of hind-limb elements. Comber (2001) argues that faunal assemblages from three excavations provide evidence for the transfer of animals between different social strata. The three are Seacash (a univallate rath in Co. Antrim), Lisdoo (a bivallate rath in Co. Fermanagh), and Rathmullen (a raised rath in Co Down). She suggests that Lisdoo acquired legs of mutton and sent out joints of pork; that Seacash acquired both shoulders of lamb and joints of pork; and that Rathmullen sent out joints of pork.

Skeletal part frequencies are the most difficult of the three methods to use because a host of different factors radically influence the frequency of elements. Soil acidity, gnawing by animals, and human processing of carcasses for marrow and grease all can lead to certain elements being absent in calculations of element frequency. For example, in the New Graveyard assemblage at Clonmacnoise, by one calculation method, the highest utility elements are far less common than expected. This pattern might suggest that "joints" are exported from a site. But whe

[44] Kelly, 1997: 254.
[45] Gerriets 1983: 51.

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element frequency is calculated in a different manner, the high utility elements become present at an expected frequency. Furthermore, large sample sizes are necessary for avoiding sampling error. The Seacash assemblage is too small for drawing reliable conclusions. More importantly though, while the Lisdoo and Rathmullen assemblages are larger, the reports do not provide the anatomical detail necessary for discriminating between formation processes. Finally, as was noted above, McCormick has argued that the area around Rathmullen (Lecale) appears to have high reliance on arable agriculture and that this circumstance explains the anomalous features of the faunal assemblage. In sum, it is not at all clear that these assemblages represent export of joints.

One other possible example of imbalanced skeletal representation exists. The middle status ringfort known as Deer Park Farms has produced a sizeable animal bone assemblage (McCormick and Murray *in press*). As was discussed above, documents suggest that the occupants of such a site might be required to give the "fat from the rear third of a cow" in clientage dues. Such a requirement would suggest that, by comparison to a high status site, the bone assemblage from Deer Park Farms would have a lower percentage of bones from the rear third of a cow. Interestingly, a difference does exist between Deer Park Farms and Moynagh Lough in terms of the presence of femurs and tibia. Deer Park Farms has considerably fewer than Moynagh Lough (McCormick and Murray). These are exactly the elements one would expect to leave a site through clientage. McCormick and Murray, however, point to the fact that Deer Park Farms and Moynagh Lough have equivalent numbers of lower hind-limb bones, a frequency which they view as improbable if the rear third of cattle were leaving Deer Park Farms. Based on this discrepancy, they conclude, "It is unlikely that this discrepancy reflects different types of human activity on the two sites" (McCormick and Murray).

Unfortunately, documents are not precise in the exact meaning of "the rear third of a cow." It is unclear if the cut would include the entire legs or, if the lower limb bones, which are associated with an area lacking in meat, would have been removed prior to sending the rear third off. If they were, in fact, removed, then the skeletal part ratio from Deer Park Farms might well reflect transportation of a portion of the carcass through clientage. But, even if this were the case, as with the distinctions between

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ringforts, the evidence does not suggest a wide gulf between different strata. The argument that the Deer Park Farms assemblage reflects transfer of meat via clientage is further weakened by the fact that, while one would expect a high status site such as Moynagh Lough to have the reverse distribution with more hind-limb bones than fore-limb bones if it is receiving the rear third of a cow. The frequencies for fore- and hind-limb bones are, however, roughly equal (McCormick and Murray). Furthermore, a third site, Marshes Upper 3, also provides no evidence for the transfer of hind limbs, neither to nor from the site.[46] Published data from this site present skeletal part frequency in a slightly different manner from sites discussed thus far, consequently direct comparisons are difficult, but, via a different method of calculation, the proportion of hind to fore limb elements is nearly equal[47]. At best then, available evidence provides equivocal support for the suggestion that clientage creates stratified access to the most desirable cuts of meat.

The third method of examining stratification, *age structure*, also provides little evidence of striking differences between sites. An age profile for a species in an assemblage is an estimate of age at death based on patterns in skeletal features that change in a predictable manner as an individual grows. The most reliable method of aging animals is based on the eruption and wear of teeth. As with other methods of examining social stratification via animal bones, the age profiles from ringfort excavations are remarkably consistent, probably reflecting a common orientation on dairy production. McCormick argues that such an orientation will lead to slaughter of two categories of cattle: young males and elderly females (1983). Most rural assemblages have this basic pattern to their cattle remains (McCormick 1992a). Small variations in this basic pattern could, however, reflect an imbalanced transfer of desirable animals through

[46] Gowen 1992: 114.

[47] The estimates from other sites are based on MNI estimates for individual elements. MNI (minimum number of individuals) is calculated by separating left and right skeletal elements and determining the right or left element that is present in the greatest number. For example, if a sample has 10 left cattle femurs, 4 right cattle femurs, and no other element present in greater numbers, that sample must have had at least 10 individual cattle in it (MNI=10). My estimate for Marshes Upper is based on fragment counts for each element.

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clientage. Law texts describe patrons lending cows and receiving cows or male calves as a portion of renders due from base-clients.[48] Since with a dairying orientation little incentive exists to keep male calves alive after they are weaned, they are likely to be slaughtered shortly after being transferred and consequently should leave a clear mark in the archaeological record. The change in the percentages of cattle slaughtered could reflect render of calves to an elite group.

Age profiles from Deer Park Farms and Moynagh Lough do have slightly different ratios of young to old animals. [49] Based on data in McCormick and Murray, at Deer Park Farms 36.6% of the mandibles are assigned to age categories under 24 months and 60.4% to categories over 24 months (N=53). By contrast at Moynagh Lough 56.4% are under the 24 month category and 43.6% are over (N=195). A smaller assemblage from the second historic period settlement at Knowth shows the same pattern as Moynagh. As is noted above, other studies have shown that high status groups do dominate access to the most desirable cuts of meat. Consequently, the modest differences in the incidence of immature cattle could reflect a similar situation. Alternatively, such variation could also be the product of variation in management strategies. Emphasis on meat production fosters the slaughter of slightly older cattle than does dairy centered production because in dairy production male cattle become surplus after they have been weaned. The pattern found at Moynagh is suggestive of a heavy dairying orientation (McCormick 1983). The Deer Park Farms pattern could reflect a greater emphasis on meat production instead of clientage trade in younger cattle to high status sites.

At best, then, the animal bone evidence provides much the same view of stratification in early medieval Ireland that ringfort studies do. If one is willing to set aside ambiguities in the evidence, it is possible to discern small distinctions between sites. If one focuses on those

[48] Gerriets 1983: 51.

[49] The method of used for assessing age in these assemblages is based on tooth eruption and wear. This method defines age stages by the range of months at which a particular eruption or wear event occurred in an experimental population. Since substantial variation exists between ancient and modern populations, the various stages cannot be associated firmly with precise ages for cattle.

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ambiguities, then even those small distinctions disappear. In either case, evidence for clientage-based stratification should be circumscribed by a more fundamental concern about clientage. The conclusion that faunal assemblages fail to reflect a heavily imbalanced transfer of goods is partly based on the assumption that clientage is a wealth extracting mechanism. If clientage had other significant roles, the difficulty in discerning stratification based on animal bone assemblages may not result so much from problems with the assemblages, but rather, from problems with approaches to early medieval Ireland. If stratification is so difficult to isolate, rather than investing small differences with an inordinate importance, a more effective approach may be to recognize that cooperative strategies can foster social complexity such as an urban monastery.

If one adopts this perspective, the question that remains is how change can occur if it was not spurred by coercive strategies. As was noted above, one of the reasons why egalitarian societies are typically thought incapable of producing urban centers is that they are not associated with the heterogeneous economies thought essential for social complexity to develop. They foster economic *homogeneity*. If the above assessment of the society generating monastic towns is accurate, economic homogeneity must also somehow foster urbanism.

Clientage, Cattle, and Economic Homogeneity

> [In] ancient Irish society cows were...of such overweening importance that they almost had a status as members of a society.
> --A.T. Lucas (1989: 3)

The clientage system in early medieval Ireland committed all participants to fundamentally the same economic orientation: cattle. Instead of enhancing stratification and economic heterogeneity, in many respects, this orientation leveled differences between strata and fostered economic homogeneity. Clients were an essential marker of status, but in order to get clients, one had to have cattle just as clients did. While clientage may have eased the burden of keeping large herds and may have

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increased the upper limit for herd size, a lord's status and wealth still depended directly on cattle. The nutritional and ecological needs of cattle made accumulating cattle wealth significantly more difficult than accumulating precious metal or currency. Cattle required care. They took years to mature and reproduce. They had specific pasturage requirements and were vulnerable to disease. Additionally, as McCormick (n.d.) points out, slaughter of a single animal created so much meat that spoilage would have been a significant problem given the absence of refrigeration. He suggests that sharing meat between strata—feasting—was a likely solution to this problem. For scholars who equate clientage and stratification, such features of clientage in early medieval Ireland constrained the powers of elites and retarded the development of social complexity. They were hindrances to the development of economic heterogeneity.

But, they also fostered economic homogeneity. If, as new perspectives on social complexity suggest, these mutualistic features of clientage were not epiphenomenal, the social consequences of clientage were quite different. One does not need recourse to inert elites who did not use the coercive tools at hand. The fundamental significance becomes pooling of resources. The exemplar of economic homogeneity—a kin-based society—operates through membership in a group and pooling resources. Economic homogeneity can foster social complexity in early medieval Ireland if this pooling of resources expanded to encompass more than small kin groups. Earlier, the key feature of monastic towns was identified as the elaboration of a common base through which groups could interact. In economic terms, this statement means that increasing social complexity was growth in the size of the economic unit so that the exchanges once defining a relatively small group became spread across a larger group. In this approach to social complexity, change was not correlated with the loss of kin-based exchange and economic homogeneity, the core of an egalitarian society. Change was the elaboration of that organization.

In terms of clientage, having both the lord and client depending on cattle-based wealth ensured some fundamental economic homogeneity. If that situation did not change—for example if a monetary economy did not emerge—the expansion of clientage did not necessarily break that fundamental equality in economic orientation; it was an elaboration of that

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orientation. Clientage clearly involved coercion aimed at deepening divisions between social strata, but cattle-based clientage also involved pooling of resources and creation of a common identity. Recognizing this dual nature of clientage eliminates the need to question why early medieval Irish lords did not use the coercive powers clientage gives them. Clientage fostered complex social dynamics that cannot be measured only in terms of coercion.

A rarely discussed reference to clientage supports this view. Adomnán's *Life of Columba* contains two miracle tales that concern clients.[50] In each of the stories, a poor man gave hospitality to Columba for a night. On both occasions the saint asked how many cattle the man possessed. When he heard that each had only five cattle, Columba blessed those cattle and the herd miraculously increased to 105. Columba guaranteed that prosperity for three generations. As the promise of enduring prosperity emphasized, the grant of cattle provided a means of arresting a downward socio-economic slide. The relationship also provided the monastic client a certain level of access to the monastic community by extending the privilege of saintly protection. While a monastic client's status was not the same as a monk's, as Bitel suggests, clients shared a "muted from of monastic identity" with those figures.[51] In other words, they achieved some level of inclusion in the monastic community.

The link between this story and the perspective advanced here becomes overt in the second tale. Columba added a proviso to the blessing. He stated that the number of cattle would never increase beyond 105: "For those beasts that surpassed the above predetermined number were carried off by various mischances and nowhere seen again," except for those cattle that were used for "the own needs of the household or else to the use of charity".[52] In this manner, Adomnán depicted Columba as guaranteeing that the cattle will be used to foster economic homogeneity Those used for other purposes were carried off "in a strange manner." Thi

[50] Anderson and Anderson 1961: 366-371.

[51] Bitel 1990: 124.

[52] "*excepto eo quod aut in usus proprios familiae aut etiam in opus elimoysinae expendi poterat*"; Anderson and Anderson 1961: 370-1.

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statement does not preclude exploitation and coercion as factors in clientage. It would be blinkered to suggest that they did not. But, it does demonstrate an orientation on cooperative strategies in contemporary accounts of clientage that matches the perspective offered here.

Since such stories also defined a role for monasteries in society, they are equally significant for considering how monastic towns arose. Often, religious stories with overt expression of cooperative aims are viewed as propaganda merely masking coercive aims. This approach to religion has been extremely productive.[53] But, it misses the role religion plays in the elaboration of a common base or a common identity. Renfrew attributes urban developments to religious devotion: "a powerful belief system that has led them to these costly and expressive acts".[54] There is an element of economic pragmatism in this conception of religion. The costly and expressive acts that an urban monastery represents served to expand the trade network while maintaining kin-based cooperative strategies.

From this perspective, the tales from Adomnán's *Life of Columba* are substantially more than ideology or empty propaganda. Rather than suggesting that the cattle provisioning that occurred at Clonmacnoise circa AD 700 was part of a nascent market economy administered to benefit newly powerful elites (the prevailing explanation for northwestern European urbanization), the provisioning of Clonmacnoise becomes an extension of clientage. If this is the case, as the apparent contradiction associated with clientage becomes explicable, so the presence of an urban center in a relatively egalitarian society becomes explicable.

Conclusion

It is not reasonable to view clientage in early medieval Ireland as only fostering a higher degree of social stratification. Deeper social divides might have been one consequence, but that consequence must be considered in the context of cooperative features of this institution. The implications this circumstance has for understanding early medieval Irish

[53] See Kolb (1994) for a recent example of this approach to religion in precontact Hawaii.
[54] Renfrew 2001: 18.

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society are vast. Certainly, the idea that early medieval Irish social organization kept rulers in check has been thoroughly examined, but most frequently this approach leads only to consideration of how rulers go about slipping out of those constraints. The perspective advocated here does not reject the importance of that process; however, an awareness of cooperative strategies does circumscribe its importance by identifying other processes that are significant factors in shaping early medieval Irish society. The aim of this paper is essentially corrective. Recent discussion has generally given only a regressive role to cooperative strategies. A balanced understanding of early medieval Irish society must recognize a wider role for them. Ultimately, the most interesting results of recognizing the significance of cooperative strategies will come from examining conflicts between the diverse strategies clientage simultaneously fosters. But, first, it is necessary to identify the nature and significance of cooperative strategies.

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